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The man nobody watched

How much the Russians may have learned from accused spy Ronald Pelton is unclear, but Americans are learning plenty about their own counterintelligence, none of it encouraging. Twice Mr. Pelton is said to have telephoned the Soviet Embassy to set up a meeting, and twice the calls were taped by American intelligence. But because our agents were running behind in listening to the intercepts, nobody was watching when Mr. Pelton allegedly walked through the embassy gates to whisper his little secrets.

Subsequently this former prodigy at the National Security Agency padded off to Austria, meeting there twice with his Soviet contacts, says the government. Again nobody was watching. The voice on the tapes was not recognized, and American intelligence had lost interest in Mr. Pelton when, only six months before the embassy phone calls, he had declared bankruptcy and quit his job at the NSA — i.e., they lost interest precisely when suspicion ought to have been aroused.

Almost as puzzling is the zeal with which,

on the opening day of the Pelton trial in Baltimore this week, the government's lawyers babbled at length about some of the country's best-kept intelligence secrets — disclosures described as being without precedent. If compromising intelligence were necessary to get convictions, that would be one thing. But it isn't. "Graymail" laws, specifically designed to keep spies from escaping prosecution by threatening to blab publicly, allow espionage evidence to be taken *in camera*.

It makes no sense. CIA Director William Casey has threatened news organizations, including this newspaper, with criminal prosecution for revealing information less sensational. Government employees have been fired for leaking. Now this. What gives? A

Mr. Pelton may not be the spy of the decade. It may turn out that he didn't sell the Russians some of our best-kept secrets. But when it comes to the way our government handles counterespionage, already the Pelton case is making the eyes bug. Stay tuned, if you can stand it.